

Congress in a New Race: For the Best Office Space

By Margaret Talev

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WASHINGTON – There's a double meaning in the sign taped to a Dumpster outside the Capitol Hill office of Virginia's soon-to-be-ex-GOP-Sen. George Allen. It pleads: “Allen: Do not remove.”

Tons of paper, furnishings, equipment and years' worth of nostalgia are being yanked from the suites of lawmakers who weren't re-elected this month or are retiring to make way for colleagues who called dibs on their office space.

In a domino effect, junior members now stuck with low-status offices grab what they can get among the newly opened suites and pass the dregs down to the freshmen. The House of Representatives already has finished its selections. The Senate is still at it.

Then there are the coveted “hideaways” in the majestic Capitol building itself – unmarked locked offices that perhaps 80 senators and fewer House members claim for meeting privately with whomever they wish to between votes. Some of those are up for grabs, too.

Sure, there are committee assignments to compete for, and that pledge by Democrats to focus on important stuff like cleaning up corruption and easing out of Iraq. But first things first: We're talking about prime Washington real estate.

The biennial office shuffle is a Byzantine and closely guarded tradition, with separate rules for each chamber and a century of lore that includes bootlegging.

Among this year's highlights:

- The Republicans' loss of power means that Vice President Dick Cheney can probably kiss goodbye his unofficial office on the House side of the Capitol.

As president of the Senate, Cheney gets offices on the Senate side. But in 2001, House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill., also gave Cheney an off-the-books spot near the House floor.

It was previously House Ways and Means Committee turf, but Chairman Bill Thomas, R-Bakersfield, had squirreled away enough office space elsewhere that he could let it go.

Now, Thomas is retiring, his party's out of power, and incoming Ways and Means Chairman Charles Rangel, D-N.Y., no Cheney fan, has asked Speaker-designate Nancy Pelosi, D-San Francisco, to return H-208 to his committee's control.

■Pelosi plans to break with tradition and leave her current leadership suite, which staffers said Democrats Tip O'Neill and Tom Foley used when they were speakers, for the speaker's suite used by Hastert and his GOP predecessors, including Newt Gingrich.

Hastert's prime view of the Mall trumps what Pelosi has now, and taking it has the added benefit of tweaking Republicans. But those aren't Pelosi's major considerations, her aides insisted. Work on the Capitol Visitor Center has eaten into the House minority leader's office space significantly and Pelosi needs more room for her staff, they said.

Republican leaders are “kind of left to wait and divide up whatever's left over,” said a wistful Kevin Madden, spokesman for incoming House Minority Leader John Boehner, R-Ohio.

■When Sen. Rick Santorum, R-Pa., lost re-election, aides say, it pained not only social conservatives, but also the Senate's sweet tooth. He was the keeper of the “candy desk,” which senators visited on their way into the chamber. The next senator to sit there will be expected to stock treats.

Retirements of senior members usually yield the best spaces. This year brings the departure of 82-year-old House International Relations Committee Chairman Henry Hyde, R-Ill., for example. Rep. Solomon Ortiz, a Texas Democrat first elected in 1982, snagged Hyde's prime Rayburn building office in the lottery.

“It's a dead-on view of the Capitol, you can see the Mall, it's the first floor and it's a bigger space” than his previous office, said Ortiz's communications director, Cathy Travis.

Some lawmakers covet offices once held by figures such as Presidents Kennedy or Lyndon Johnson. Others opt for space: The smallest suites are less than 850 square feet, the largest twice that.

As in high school, freshmen can't be choosy.

The Cannon House Office Building's fifth floor is considered a freshman trap. Members' offices have windows with courtyard views, but the air conditioning is spotty in summer, and the offices are hard to get to (some elevators go only to the fourth floor). Even less desirable are two “split” suites on lower floors of Cannon.

Just ask Rep.-elect Michael Arcuri, D-New York, who got the last pick in last week's lottery. To get from one end of his office to the other, he'll have to leave and re-enter through another door.

Party leaders assign newly available Capitol hideaways and take both seniority and partisanship into account. During the years, leaders of both parties squeezed administrative offices out of the Capitol itself to make room for more coveted hideaways, Senate historian Richard Baker said.

House historian Fred Beuttler said one of the most infamous hideaways wasn't in the Capitol at all and its occupant wasn't a congressman. During Prohibition, a bootlegger known as "the man in the green hat" set up shop in a room in the Cannon building and peddled to lawmakers until he got busted.

Pelosi, who'll be the first female speaker of the House, by tradition inherits a legendary hideaway just below the House chamber, known as the "Board of Education" room.

Iconic 20th-century speakers Nicholas Longworth, John Nance "Cactus Jack" Garner and Sam Rayburn called young members down there to explain to them how things worked.